

Steve Berg, *MinnPost*

If we were living in, say, 1965, Michele Bachmann's version of a four-lane, freeway-style Stillwater Bridge might seem to make sense.

Back then, the idea that some rivers should be protected as "wild and scenic" hadn't yet become federal law. Environmentalism itself hadn't yet taken hold as a civic value. The unintended consequences of sprawled development were not yet apparent.

Few people understood the downside of the super-sized highways and bridges that were popping up everywhere; that they would induce lifestyle changes that would impose big costs, for example, on air quality, climate, energy supply and foreign policy. Few understood the social expenses that all the new driving-dependent commerce would levy on older cities left behind. Few realized the inefficiency costs that a new and largely redundant infrastructure would leave for local governments and future taxpayers.

What the congresswoman proposes now is a mid-20th century solution to a 21st century problem. In reality, it's good that a new high-profile bridge over the scenic St. Croix River just south of Stillwater has been held up for more than a decade because it's now clearer that such a bridge would be a mistake. Gov. Mark Dayton was right to impose a reevaluation of the project, not solely because of the National Park Service's aesthetic objections but because a high-profile, high-speed, high-capacity bridge is not in Minnesota's best interest.

Benefit should be reexamined

- Start with the money. Spending as much as \$698 million (\$450 million from Minnesota) on the super-sized bridge would benefit primarily several thousand Wisconsin commuters and could invite an explosion of cross-river development of homes and jobs in the future. Why would that be good for Minnesota's economy and tax base? Why would it be good metropolitan policy? Why would it be good for the scenic and environmental qualities of the St. Croix valley?

In defending a large-scale bridge, Washington County Commissioner Gary Kriesel told the Star Tribune: "The last thing we would want to do is build a [smaller] bridge that would be put at capacity as soon as the economy turns around."

But Kriesel assumes that a new and recovering economy will be identical to the old one. That's not likely. It would be wiser for public policy to anticipate new kinds of markets for housing, business and transportation that fit new global realities: less sprawl, less dependence on long-distance driving, less excessive fuel burning and more modest highway projects that reflect the need not only for government efficiency but for efficiency in business and lifestyle.

Put another way, government should not continue to subsidize old-market behaviors as new markets emerge. The big-bridge design is obsolete. It would carry four lanes of traffic high above the river, from bluff-top to bluff-top. It would accommodate heavy trucks at speeds of 65 mph. It would be, in fact, a suburban freeway-style crossing in a setting that requires more finesse, both in design and in economic purpose.

Same dollars, more bridges

- Spending nearly \$700 million on a single bridge project when many others are lined up for repair is another money problem. MnDOT's latest report reveals five large bridges not scheduled for repair or replacement until after 2018 that could move up in the bonding process if a more modest Stillwater Bridge were built at, say, two-thirds the cost. Those include Mississippi River crossings in Winona (\$185 million) and Red Wing (\$150 million) and major projects in Baudette, East Grand Forks and New Ulm (\$44 million to \$70 million each).

- A third objection to a mega-bridge is that it's designed to solve a problem (relentless commuter congestion) that doesn't really exist. On Thursday, a normal workday, during the so-called teeth of the morning rush hour, I drove from Somerset, Wis., toward Stillwater. At the top of the bluff, gazing across at one of America's most picturesque towns, I descended to the river, crossed the old Lift Bridge, proceeded through town and on toward St. Paul down Hwy. 36 without delay. Traffic was light to moderate. No more than eight or ten cars stacked up after the bridge to turn left down Main Street in Stillwater, but it wasn't a big deal. I took an alternate street and did just fine, not hitting any serious traffic until Maplewood.

Congestion is a seasonal problem in the St. Croix Valley, having mainly to do with summer tourism. It's a relatively happy problem that nearly every scenic area must endure. It's a problem better solved by a scenic bridge that fits the character of Stillwater's magical setting and the pace of local community life. Engineers call it "context sensitive design" and that's what a new river crossing should employ.

It's clear that the old Lift Bridge must be replaced. Even the environmental groups opposing the big-bridge idea favor a smaller bridge. (Bachmann accused them of pursuing a "radical political agenda" and demanded that they "stop lying about my legislation.") Environmental groups accuse Bachmann of "earmarking" the big bridge project. Actually, her bill would exempt a large-scale bridge from the National Park Service's disapproval. It includes no appropriation. Still, one assumes that Bachmann would vote for the money needed to approve the bigger bridge if it ever came before Congress. "It's fair to call this 'a bridge to hypocrisy,' " said Jim Erkel, land use and transportation director for the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy.

Politics aside, how might a more modest bridge look and how might it operate?

Design would fit Stillwater's character

Here's my favorite scenario: Even if the new crossing is at Oak Park Heights as currently planned, the new bridge would be low to the water, matching the profile of the Lift Bridge as closely as possible. Its design would fit Stillwater's historic character. A mechanism would allow the bridge to lift or swing to allow taller boats to pass. A single span accommodating three lanes of traffic and no heavy trucks would be sufficient. The center lane would carry westbound traffic in the mornings and eastbound in the afternoons. Speeds (and noise) would be kept relatively low. Tolls would help repay construction bonds and upkeep expenses. The tolls would change depending on traffic demand. The old Lift Bridge would be retained as a pedestrian and bike crossing and a recreational pier.

That's a cheaper, smarter solution that matches the realities of the day. It imposes less on the river while taking some traffic pressure off Main Street during the summer months. It takes advantage of MnDOT's considerable skill at managing traffic congestion at minimal cost. It matches the MnDOT-Metropolitan Council Transportation Policy Plan, which places a priority on maintaining current roads and bridges while using other means (traffic management, tolls, transit and compact development) to improve mobility. Most of all, it produces a bridge that fits

the new century, not the old one.